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ABSTRACT

The United Nations' Regional Programme for the Universalization and Renewal of Primary Education and the Eradication of Adult Illiteracy in the Arab States by the Year 2000 (ARABUPEAL) began in 1987. Among the educational problems confronting Arab States are that their educational objectives do not specifically relate to development objectives, the links are weak between the curriculum and the needs of students and society, the methods of instruction are traditional and stereotyped, and there is little coordination between education and other sectors of development. Groups targeted by the program are: school-age children; primary school dropouts; unemployed school leavers; adolescent and adult illiterates; and workers in the unorganized sectors, particularly migrants. The program will be carried out by means of a regional plan and plans for individual states. Administration and planning issues include the fact that the project presents a new vision of education, all available resources must be mobilized to achieve a networking effect, and the cooperation of universities must be enlisted. Issues about curricula, teaching methods, and teaching materials include: how to bridge the gap between school culture and local cultures, how to incorporate concepts of modern science, and how to integrate the curriculum. A national network will be set up in each member state to develop its national educational plan. Each network will be composed of educational and developmental institutions selected on the basis of their innovative capabilities. (CML)

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LITERACY LESSONS

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

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The Arab States: a programme to renew primary education and eradicate illiteracy

by Abdelwahid Abdalla Yousif

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ORIGINS

In its struggle to universalize primary education and to eradicate illiteracy throughout the world, Unesco has provided technical support to co-operative regional projects and programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean (1980), Africa (1983) and in Asia and the Pacific (1986). The first steps towards launching a similar programme in the Arab States were taken at a meeting of senior education officials at Amman, Jordan, in June 1987. The initial proposal was given the support of the Unesco General Conference later that same year. A period of consultation followed, culminating in the adoption of a regional programme, called The Regional Programme for the Universalization and Renewal of Primary Education and the Eradication of Adult Illiteracy in the Arab States by the year 2000 (ARABUPEAL).

The purpose of this programme is to promote the development of education, as well as general development, in the Arab region. Compared to previous regional efforts, it has two advantages: first, it seeks to link quantative expansion to qualitative development; second, it reinforces links between Arab States and the international community, especially with those countries experiencing conditions similar to those of the Arab Nation. The guidelines for co-operative action foresaw the involvement of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), and the Arab Bureau of Education of the Gulf States (ABEGS).

Regarding the development of basic primary education, literacy and adult education, the Arab States have, during the past decade, achieved notable progress, though with varying degrees, both quantitatively and qualitatively. However, the final outcome still falls short of the objectives set forth in the Arab Literacy Strategy (1976) and the Arab Strategy for the Development of Education (1978). It had been assumed that the universalization of primary education would be achieved in the mid-1960s (Conference on Free Compulsory Education in the Arab States 1954-55), and that illiteracy would be eradicated by the end of the 1970s (First Alexandria Conference, 1964). However, the time limits have been extended several times.

Some of the problems confronting the first level of education in the Arab States are:

- *educational objectives do not specifically relate to the development objectives;*
- *the links between curriculum and pupil's needs on the one hand, and societal needs on the other are weak;*
- *the methods of instruction are traditional and stereotyped;*
- *teacher education and training follow traditional approaches, and more often than not the role of the teacher is confined to parrot-teaching of school subjects. He is neither given the proper professional training, nor encouraged to participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the educational process. Moreover, the poor quality material and the social conditions of primary school and literacy teachers reduce their capacity, innovation and creativity to the minimum;*
- *the educational administrative machinery is generally weak and highly centralized;*
- *there appears to be little coordination between education and other sectors of development;*
- *insufficient attention is given by research centres to the issues of universalization and renewal of primary education, literacy and adult education.*

As for illiteracy and adult education, most Arab States face constraints regarding the implementation of their plans and programmes. Such constraints include:

- *marginal handling of illiteracy which is not considered a part of the official education system proper. Subsequently, the eradication of illiteracy has not been placed high on the scale of priorities in terms of policy;*
- *plans and programmes for eradication of illiteracy in most Arab States suffer from a lack of adequate human and financial resources, high drop-out rates among students and a high degree of frustration among teachers;*
- *there is little coordination between formal and non-formal education.*

The illiteracy rate in the age group 15 and older was about 50% (70% for females) in the same year. The gross enrolment ratios in primary education in the Arab region in 1985 were within 86.4% (75.2% for females). In that year they were still below 50% in Mauritania, Somalia and Sudan and in both Yemen and Democratic Yemen.

The level of education in the Arab States for both children and adults first must undergo radical changes in respect of its philosophy, policies, objectives, plans and methods of implementation, in order to respond to the needs of both individuals and society.

GENERAL OBJECTIVES

This programme is designed to contribute to the development of Arab education systems at the level of literacy and primary education so as to ensure the right to education for all, enhance socio-economic development and stimulate creative energies in the society.

Unesco Member States in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia and the Pacific have chosen the year 2000 for the evaluation of their efforts in the universalization and renewal of primary education and the eradication of illiteracy. Despite the late start of the ARABUPEAL as compared to other regional programmes, most Arab Member States should comply with the same time limit: the year 2000. It is hoped that some of the positive factors in the region, such as pan-Arab action within the framework of the Arab Strategy for the Development of Education and the Arab Literacy strategy, together with a common language and a cultural heritage shared by the Arab States, will help overcome the obstacles.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

The specific objective of the programme is to consolidate Arab national and regional efforts and offer technical assistance and advisory services to the Arab Member States, with a view to achieving the following objectives:

1. *To provide the opportunity, by the year 2000, for all children of school age to enrol in the primary stage of education for a continued period of at least six years.*
2. *To eliminate illiteracy among youth and adults by providing education for the whole society.*
3. *To improve the quality of both formal and non-formal education and to raise the efficiency of the educational systems through interaction with development programmes, reform, renewal and integration between both formal and non-formal subsectors of education.*
4. *To widen the scope of dialogue between educational institutions and the home on one hand, and between the State and the people on the other.*

The target groups concerned are:

- School-age children, especially those who, for some reason, have not had access to education.
- Primary school drop-outs.

- Unemployed primary school leavers who face difficulties in finding employment because they lack the technical and vocational skills.
- Adolescent and adult illiterates.
- Workers in the unorganized sectors, particularly migrants to urban areas, bearing in mind the anticipated demographic growth and urbanization which add to present difficulties.

Priority within each of the foregoing categories will be given to the rural population, under-privileged groups, females and youth.

The proposed programme is a comprehensive endeavour that depends on an integrated strategy combining primary education and literacy in the context of life-long learning, it is a shift from 'elitist' education to 'education for all' requiring increased efforts and energies to cater to the increased numbers of beneficiaries. The programme also represents a shift from individual actions to the mobilization of the masses and the optimal investment of resources, in addition to the multiple tasks of management planning, research and evaluation, generation and dissemination of information, the production of teaching materials and aids, etc.

It may be that the period scheduled for the achievement of the programme objectives will not be sufficient for the universalization and renewal of primary education and the eradication of illiteracy in all Arab States. However, it is hoped that by the end of the year 2000, national programmes will have made good headway in determining the course of action in the light of practical experience in teacher training, curriculum implementation, and the use of modern methods and techniques, which, it is hoped, will feature high on the priorities scale.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME: REGIONAL AND NATIONAL PLANS OF ACTION

The programme objectives will be carried out by means of a regional plan of action and plans for individual states. Following are the most prominent issues that should be given due consideration in the plans of action, both at regional and national levels:

Administration and planning

- Personnel engaged in education, training and literacy work are spread over several ministries and governmental and non-governmental departments and agencies, cohesion is therefore lacking in the management of operations aimed at achieving the desired objectives. *The crucial issue is therefore how to involve all this personnel in the preparation, execution and evaluation of the programme activities in a continued and integrated manner.*
- This programme presents a new vision of educational action. *It seeks, through innovative ways and means, to introduce modifications in the existing administrative structures and the training of leaders and trainers to ensure the successful planning and management of the programme on a national level.*
- There is usually a tendency to seek assistance from familiar sources (the States, regional and international organizations and agencies, etc.), but the scarcity of such sources sometimes slows action to a standstill. *The important step to be taken is to extend involvement and mobilize all locally available resources as well as foreign resources so as to achieve a networking effect on the education system as a whole.*

- Universities usually contribute very little to efforts aimed at the development of education systems, with regard to both the cultivation of intellectuals and the undertaking of studies aimed to increase knowledge about the subject. *Hence the need to consider ways and means of enlisting the co-operation of universities for an optimal investment of available national resources.*
- The universalization of primary education and the eradication of illiteracy call for more intensive mobilization of public opinion and effective contributions on the part of all labour, youth, social, cultural and women's organizations, unions and associations in society. Target groups should be motivated to enrol in schools and literacy classes, and sustained co-operative and motivational efforts should be directed to this purpose.

Curricula, teaching methods and materials

- A wide gap exists between 'school culture' and local cultures, leading to the alienation of children belonging to poorer families, rural or ethnic groups vis-à-vis school education, thus resulting in failure, under-achievement and dropping out. On the other hand, successful children withdraw from their own communities and are attracted by urban life or the life styles of groups other than those of their own communities. *The issue here is how to bridge the gap between school culture and local cultures in order to reduce wastage and raise the efficiency of education.*
- Children enrolled in schools at the beginning of the 1990s will join the labour force at the beginning of the twenty-first century. *Due consideration must therefore be given to ways and means of incorporating concepts of modern science and techniques in school curricula in order to provide wider opportunities for adaptation to the next century.*

- There is a tendency towards improvisation in the selection of Arabic linguistic material for both children and adults (vocabulary and language structures). Such improvisation, which is in fact due to the relative absence of basic linguistic competence, impedes proper learning of the Arabic language as well as other educational subjects. *A proper knowledge of the Arabic language is the key to the sources of learning.*
- *School subjects should no longer be taught in isolation.* Even the teaching of Arabic is presently divided into independent subjects (e.g. reading, grammar, dictation, etc.). This has an adverse effect on the educational process and weakens the key role of Arabic in the curriculum. It also adds to the difficulties of shifting from mere knowledge of concepts, particularly in

TEACHERS

Many Arab States suffer a shortage of qualified teachers, and those available are reluctant to accept additional work, whether in class or outside, in the absence of adequate material and moral incentives. Resistance to change is characteristic of any system, and is all the more so in groups of people whose members are filled with resentment due to the low social and economic status of the teaching profession and their feeling of marginality within an education system in which they are generally regarded as mere tools of implementation. Would teachers, under such circumstances, agree to participate in literacy work? Hence the urgent need to improve the professional and social status, and the living and working conditions of educational personnel.

At present, the curricula of teacher education and training tend to stress individual differences, confirming the concept of discrimination among children and leading to the exclusion of weaker children from school life, thus increasing the rate of repetition and drop-out. There is a need to stress the pedagogy of success that gives prominence to the positive aspects in pupils' behaviour, and attracts them to the school.

The launching of literacy campaigns raises the problem of providing the required numbers of instructors from both within and outside the education system. Educated people capable of teaching illiterates are available in adequate numbers, e.g. in universities and other sectors. Obstacles to their mobilization for literacy campaigns and to provisions for suitable crash training courses should be removed.

science, to higher levels of cognitive capacity and commitment, e.g. application, evaluation, analysis and synthesis.

- Generally speaking, literacy and adult education curricula and teaching methods do not seem to attract potential learners. Their living and working conditions do not pose any challenges that induce them to exert extra effort to learn at the expense of their productive work and leisure. *This situation requires the modernization of curricula, teaching concepts and methods in order to attract learners and motivate them.*



Photo: Unesco

To help achieve the desired goals, activities under the plans of action can be divided into the following four sub-programmes:

Sub-programme 1:
Development of administration and planning

The launching of the ARABUPEAL requires that the development of administration and planning should receive top priority during its life span. The principles embodied in this sub-programme are as follows:

(a) administrative work should be founded on a sound scientific statistical basis;
(b) administration and management should be decentralized with a central working group for coordination;
(c) teachers and parents should have the opportunity to participate in all phases of the educational process;
(d) universities and institutes of higher learning should have the opportunity to participate in the preparation and execution of the work plan;
(e) educational guidance (for teachers and instructors) should be part and parcel of educational administration. Such guidance should be founded on constructive technical bases for the up-grading of teachers and the development of curricula and teaching methods;
(f) the administration of the programme should give due weight to research, evaluation, collection and dissemination of information and the mobilization of public opinion;
(g) school administration should be developed;
(h) pre-service and in-service training of administrators, planners, supervisors, statisticians and staff

engaged in educational research and evaluation should be improved;

(i) exchange of information and experiences, and continuous review and evaluation of programme activities should be organized.

Sub-programme II:
Curriculum development, teaching methods and aids

To overcome the shortcomings of educational curricula and teaching methods in the Arab States, the regional programme will seek to support the following action:

(a) modification of the content of education in order to incorporate the concepts of modern science and technology, a basic competence in language, the integration of school subjects, and the modification of teaching and evaluation methods;

(b) the creation of new patterns of education through the development of certain existing patterns in the region, e.g. the Khalwas (Koranic schools), study circles in mosques and one class-room schools, in addition to expansion of opportunities for pre-schooling;

(c) establishing a link between literacy and adult education and the world of work and social development in the context of life-long education;

(d) adopting effective procedures for establishing links between formal education and informal education, particularly in respect to children who have had no schooling, drop-outs, adolescents and adults who complete the basic stage of literacy training;

(e) provision of low-cost materials and books, and the development of educational industries in the Arab States so that they become self-sufficient.

Sub-programme III:
Teacher education and training

It goes without saying that the teacher is the key element in the educational process, and it is assumed that such a teacher is available, and is qualified and willing to perform the task required in the programme.

Under this sub-programme, training of primary and adult education teachers would be provided through new programmes which focus on problems impeding the performance of children and adults, all of which lead to drop-outs. These programmes will also seek to equip teachers with self-learning skills and new techniques, and develop the teacher's ability to make use of the common cognitive elements in all branches of education, rather than imparting a vast body of knowledge.

Sub-programme IV:
Educational and social research

The purpose of this sub-programme is, first, to support the previous three sub-programmes by providing detailed information and knowledge on the regional programme through studies, research, translations, publications, surveys, and data collection and classification. Secondly, the programme will be concerned with topics dealing with the economic, social and cultural aspects of educational provision for all, with emphasis on problems of disadvantaged groups, e.g. girls and women, rural people, low-income and poorer groups.

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WAYS TO IMPLEMENT THE REGIONAL AND NATIONAL PLANS OF ACTION

It is the Arab Member States themselves who will shoulder the primary responsibility for the execution of the programme, on the grounds that any action aimed at change and development should emanate from the society concerned. The Arab Member States are therefore called upon to exert efforts in formulating their respective national educational plans or to reconsider existing plans, and to renew their objectives and activities in the light of their potentials and the size of the target groups. Such plans should clearly define methods and mechanisms of implementation so as to contribute to economic, social and cultural development plans.

A national network will be set up in each Member State for this purpose, comprising educational and other developmental institutions involved in the regional programme, and would operate under a central unit responsible for coordination within the network as well among similar networks, national, regional and international. The national networks would consist of selected institutions having a strategic impact on activities with multiplier effect, e.g. development of administration, curricula, teacher education and educational research. Such institutions would be selected on the basis of their innovative and developmental capabilities.

The regional conference of ministers of education and those responsible for economic planning in the Arab States (MINED/ARAB), which convenes once every five years, would examine the progress of work and propose any amendments that might be deemed appropriate to answer the educational and developmental needs of the Arab Region.

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The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by Marcel de Clerck to the cause of Literacy. Mr de Clerck (Belgium) served Unesco as an educator for more than twenty years (1951–1974). He recently retired as an international civil servant at the organization's headquarters in Paris where he had been in charge of, among other things, the training of literacy workers. He is the author (1984) of *L'éducation du villageois – de l'éducation de base à l'alphabétisation fonctionnelle*.

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